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Sustainability as a Frame of Mind-and How to Develop It

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In a previous paper, I argued that the notion of education for sustainable development may be usefully approached by focusing on the idea of sustainability: not as a policy, but as a frame of mind.[1] In this paper, I would like to review certain key claims made in that piece as a precursor to exploring a number of further issues that arise with the idea of developing sustainability as a frame of mind.

So, why recommend the move from policy to frame of mind? There are two main reasons. The first has been well rehearsed elsewhere,[2] and refers to arguments that demonstrate that despite its broad appeal (indeed, in many ways because of it) the notion of sustainable development as a policy is highly problematic, being heavily contested and subject to internal contradictions and severe epistemological difficulties. The second reason is more positive. At the heart of any notion of education for sustainable development must lie a certain frame of mind involving some idea of a right relationship with nature, since without this a severely impoverished notion of human utility would become the criterion of sustainability. Focusing on this "nature-orientated" frame of mind offers the possibility of both contributing to the clarification of sustainable development as an idea, and of identifying something which is of great educational importance in its own right, for in many ways our underlying relationship with nature defines both ourselves and our relationship with the world as a whole.[3]

What, then, are the key features of sustainability as a frame of mind? The following seem central.

1. It involves a genuine (poetic) receptive-responsive openness to, and concern for, nature conceived in its most general sense as the non-human, self-originary aspects of the world. Of course, nature can be conceived in numerous ways — such as "the great order of things" (whether it be

conceived in biophysical or spiritual terms), as wilderness, as that which is innate, as that which is wholesome (natural), and so forth — but it seems to me that informing our paradigmatic senses of nature is the notion of that which is other in the sense of being experienced as somehow self-arising. In this sense nature is construed less as an objective realm than as a dimension of human awareness — understood as independent of the human will, but not necessarily unaffected by it.[4] For example, in the case of our own bodies — which clearly can be affected by our choices and actions — we maintain our health by working with powers of which we are not the author and that are beyond our ability to transform. There is a nature, an integrity, recognized as external to our will with which we have to find a harmony.

2. It is neither purely anthropocentric nor bio-centric in essence. Recognizing that the non-human (as well as the human) only shows up in the context of human concerns and practices, nature is thus human-related but neither human-authored nor at human disposal. This places humankind authentically as neither the lord of beings nor as something simply to be subsumed to some greater ecological whole, but as the occasioner of things and thus bearing certain responsibilities towards them¡i/¿ which also constitute an element of our own good. Though it cannot matter in the slightest to biophysical nature whether humankind survives — some equilibrium will always be established, with or without us — nature only has significance in that space which is human consciousness, or its equivalent.

3. Thus, there is an important sense in which sustainability as a frame of mind is not a bolt-on option but an integral element of authentic human awareness. Though now fairly systematically overridden, it is internal to the very event of being conscious at the human level. For example, it is rooted in the notion of truth and its centrality to human being. Truth — as our awareness of things disclosing themselves and our sense of the fittingness of the language which both facilitates and expresses this (*le mot juste*) — lies at the heart of human consciousness. In constituting a celebration of what *is*, relatively unsubverted by external instrumental motives, the pure sustaining nature of consciousness in this mode is also the essence of sustainability as a concern to let things be (as they are in themselves, including their cultural dimensions) — truly to safeguard, to preserve, to conserve. Clearly, this is quite a different sense of sustainability to that which seeks to sustain in order to have ready to hand a resource that may be required for some further development (such as economic growth).

4. Its development will require, above all, a radical re-evaluation and repositioning of the calculative motives and understandings that dominate modern Western consciousness and society. That is to say that it will require the development of (and partly a retrieval of) a¡i/¿ different metaphysics. Otherwise we risk the likelihood of preoccupying pupils with

> symptoms masquerading as causes. (For example, measuring pollutant levels and devising scientific remedies rather than addressing the underlying motives and conceptions embedded in social practices which give rise to pollution.) Only a thorough — if gradual — disruption of currently prevalent motives can clear a space for a more poetic re-appropriation of nature and of ourselves.

Now if such an account is to serve as a basis for thinking about how to develop sustainability as a frame of mind, certain elements in it require further elaboration and refinement.

First, poetic should not be equated with passive. We appropriate nature and ourselves not only through abstract reflection and aesthetic contemplation, but in our making and in the intimate details of our sundry daily transactions with our environment. Some aspects of this point will be developed below in a discussion of the notion of attentiveness, but it also means that while the impact of particular — in a sense, elevated — experiences may be seminal, poetic response is also constituted by day-to-day practices and action strategies which implicitly reflect the desire to disclose, conserve, and safeguard things, to respect the intuitions provided by sensuous contact, and to properly acknowledge natural rhythms and processes.

Second, this account takes issue with the notion of seeking a frame of mind that will bring about sustainability, on the grounds that such an approach makes the frame of mind subservient to some highly contentious further goal. Rather, it invites us to consider that sustainability can itself be conceived as a frame of mind — and one which is of the essence of human being and, therefore, of human well-being. Obviously, this opens it to the criticism that we do not know whether the frame of mind advocated would, in fact, bring about ecological sustainability. But the central point here is that if sustainability as a frame of mind is essential to human flourishing, its desirability is not ultimately dependent on whether it will lead to ecological sustainability. (Though given its fundamental motive to reveal and safeguard things in their own nature, it is difficult to think that it would not at least contribute to this.) Rather, its achievement, in some degree, is what gives point to the achievement of ecological sustainability and, as such, should define its character. Without it, sustained human life would be so impoverished as to be of little worth — either to itself or in its revealing of nature.

Third, it seems to me that one of the issues that this account raises is the notion of an environmental ethic — its character, its justification, and its transmission in an educational context. For example, should we be seeking to articulate an ethic towards nature as a whole, which in some way either parallels or is an extension of, say, the ethic of respect for persons? On the view expressed in this paper, the character of any such environmental ethic would differ from traditional ethics because it would have a different metaphysical basis: it would

deal with open, many-faceted, mysterious things rather than pre-defined, tightly categorized, thoroughly knowable objects; that is, it would work in, create, and sustain a world revealed in this way. In a number of ways, Freya Mathews expresses something of this in her emphasis on a self-realizing "ecocosm" as the ground of human existence,[5] and so too, does Richard Smith (if I understand him rightly) with his focus on the idea of "attentiveness" in human perception.[6] But, in my view, while both approaches are valuable for what they criticize, they suffer a certain weakness in what they assert: they make unsubstantiated assumptions about certain key values; that is, their accounts involve a tacit environmental ethic.

Taking each in turn, and very briefly, Matthews' notion of the "ecological self" which identifies with the rest of the cosmos as a system of nested, self-realizing entities, of which it is a product and by which it is sustained, advocates a strong, indeed, submersing, sense of interconnectedness with nature and feeling of eros towards it. This is claimed to be a logical extension of our natural self-love once we recognize "the involvement of wider wholes in our identity,"[7] and thus we are held to flourish when we live in a way that affirms the eco-system in which we are nested and all others flourish.

On my reading of Smith, he understandably wishes to avoid the mysticism involved in views such as this while retaining something of the essence of their attitude towards nature. He speaks of "attentiveness" as a mode of relating to things in which the demands of "the insistent, selfish ego" are put aside and in which we exercise patience and are determined to see things justly — qualities exhibited by the craftsman who has developed a feel for his material. In such attentiveness, according to Smith, the small contingent details of ordinary life and the natural world are properly respected — in a certain sense, *loved*. Such attunement with the world requires no mystical merging of mind with nature but involves acting in accordance with the internal goods of an activity, that which constitutes the genuine mutual flourishing of self and nature.

Now it seems to me that there are valuable insights in both of these accounts, but that ultimately they succeed only if we subscribe to the unsubstantiated values that are implicit in them. In my view, in the first case we should not so subscribe, and in the second we should — when their origins are revealed. The problem with Matthews' view is that despite the semblance of strong eco-centrism, ironically, it is only plausible on an anthropocentric base. The reason for this is simple: There is no state of the ecosystem that favours all its constituents. The flourishing of some involves the decline of others, and her argument can constrain us only to identify with those parts of the greater whole which we perceive to support us and not, for example, the malaria bacillus or the HIV virus. Smith's more phenomenological view has the problem of showing why "attentiveness" should respond to some simpatico with nature rather than other "internal goods" of an activity, such as the sense of elegance of battery farming as a solution to the problem of efficient food production. What is

needed here is, I believe, the kind of metaphysical underpinning that the view which started this paper attempts to provide, namely, a poetic apprehension in which that which is currently withdrawn is allowed to show itself, where the inchoate and the strange (as central elements of nature as the self-originary) are acknowledged and allowed to stand, and we participate in things in their many-sidedness and intrinsic mystery. This contrasts starkly with that attitude of mind in which everything is subjected to the quest for total (and therefore sightless) transparency through complete objective classification, such that things in their sheer presencing are constantly turned into mere instances of more general categories. Something of this might be put to us by, say, Van Gogh's painting of the rush seat chair. Here we are invited to experience the chair not merely as an instance of something you sit on, or a chair of a certain sort as in a catalogue, but as *this* chair in its own immediacy, its unique and vibrant standing there, into which we may be drawn and in which we may participate. Parallel (and further) points could be made about his sunflowers, the cornfield, the trees outside Saint Remy Asylum, and others. The environmental ethic we seek must be one in which perception and action become apt to things themselves. An ethic not of rules but of receptive response, where discernment is given priority over definition.

So how might sustainability as a frame of mind best be developed? Looking at the school curriculum as a whole, Stables and Scott have suggested that it would be a mistake to attempt to erect sustainability as an additional cross-discipline entity based on some implausible holistic conception of an appropriate frame of mind and its developmental needs.[8] They prefer a more piecemeal, post-modern approach which eschews any such grand narrative in favour of developing sustainability within the perspectives that existing school disciplines have to offer. Given that we are not in a position to regenerate the education system (including teachers' expertise and attitudes) from scratch, this would also seem to be far more realizable in practice.

However, in the light of the points made above, the following two reservations arise. First, is not this within-discipline approach susceptible to an unhelpful conservatism? Does it take proper account of the danger of motives inherent in a discipline (including its own critical procedures) which (remembering that many disciplines were rooted in a cultural milieu whose dominant aspiration was to conquer and exploit the natural world), may be covertly hostile to nature and therefore set up eco-problems in a way that conceals its own contribution to them. This will hardly be exposed by reflexive techniques within that discipline. The "primary agenda of the discipline" sometimes may need to be altered. Second, does not the within-discipline account trade on an ambiguity? Its plausibility as a realistic approach rests in playing to the established loyalties and strengths of practitioners within the disciplines, but " Â examining Â the various ways in which each discipline construes, and has construed, the human-nature relationship"[9] sounds to have more the character of a meta-disciplinary examination. This is likely to be just as unfamiliar and uncomfortable for

subject-loyal teachers as an external education for sustainability framework. It is, of course, an interesting point as to how far a particular discipline may incorporate its own meta enquiry, but it is rarely a feature of disciplines as taught at school.

To criticize a within-disciplinary approach in this way, however, is not to be committed to some holistic (in the sense of globalizing) alternative, as is perhaps sometimes assumed, with varying degrees of plausibility, by the idea of cross-curricular themes. (It also carries with it the danger of a certain eco-fascism.) It is true that many eco-related (including our understandings of nature) issues occur and must be dealt with in a piecemeal way, there being no obvious overarching objective logic to link them. From the perspective that I am developing, this is an entirely healthy state of affairs — genuine openness to situations is not enhanced by seeking to impose all-embracing systematic conceptualizations. Precisely the opposite. Nonetheless, a certain underlying posture, a certain frame of mind, which can lend such piecemeal understandings and actions a certain consistency, is required. There is a certain ethical holism in the sense that they can be sensed as somehow fitting and compatible — as, say, might be involved in feeling anger at both the assault of a young child and the vandalism of an insignificant tree. It may be argued that there is a converse ethical holism involved in anthropocentrism — exemplified in extreme form by the Nazi goal of dominating both humans and nature.[10]

Parallel reservations about conditioning by inherent values can be voiced in relation to the democratic approach to teaching environmental issues advocated by the Environment and School Initiatives program (ENSI).[11] This long-running European project is opposed to teachers promoting environmentalist attitudes (environmentalism), advocating instead that pupils exercise their own rationality through practically addressing local environmental issues in collaboration with their local community, thus developing what can be called action competence. The problem with this is the faith put in rationality, and it arises at two levels. First, can education afford to be procedurally neutral when so many other powerful influences in modern western society are not? In a social-economic-political climate that privileges consumerism and the free market how pure is the rationality of pupils and other agents in local decision-making likely to be? Indeed, (and this is the second point) are there not motives and values embedded in rationality itself that prejudice the perception and evaluation of environmental issues and which may actually be a (now invisible) contributor to the environmental problem? In the light of the critiques of Heidegger and others, many have come to appreciate that modern rationality is itself not neutral: it expresses certain aspirations towards the world, notably to classify, explain, predict, assess, control, possess, and exploit it. Arguably, it is precisely the ascendancy of such rationality that has led to our current environmental predicament. (A rationality, by the way, that can be perceived to be instantiated in the new global medium for thinking and the broadcast of understanding — networked hypermedia. But that is a further argument!) The upshot of such

points is to cast a shadow over ENSI's highly democratic strategy. They also invite the further question of the adequacy of even pure rationality to address environmental issues, which frequently involve ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual sentiments.

So, where does this leave the idea of developing sustainability as a frame of mind?

Essentially we are concerned with a gradual change in how we apprehend the world at a very fundamental level — that is, the growth of a different metaphysics within which such notions as attentiveness, democratic teaching, and the disciplines, and indeed, the criteria of rationality need to be relocated. As a priority in the educational context, we need to reconsider what counts as knowledge and learning. What projects towards the world do different kinds of knowledge and learning express? Clearly, the inherent mystery and fluid integrity of nature conceived as self-arising, and the world of open, infinitely faceted things are not susceptible to an engagement that is preoccupied with intellectual (and other) possession and that is articulated exclusively through conceptual schemes. Such facets of the world are simply occluded by teaching that has this orientation. A more intimate, intuitive, often sensuous, encounter with things must be sought. Participation, celebration, accommodation to the strange, and willingness to be affected must displace an overweening drive to disengage from the immediately present so as to set it to order, to control it — to be effective. And certainly, on this view, conventional science would cease to hold the privileged position that it currently enjoys as arbiter of our understanding of the natural world.

However, in many ways the issue is not primarily one of formal curriculum content as of the general culture of the school (and, of course society). It is a matter of the underlying versions of human flourishing and the good life that are implicit in the ethos and practices of the school as a community and how they connect with life outside. These both invite direct participation in a way of going about the world and condition the spirit in which the curriculum is taught. Only as they begin to reverberate to a different metaphysics can a space arise for those kinds of experience of the presence of nature in which the power and subtlety of otherness and the elemental is felt and allowed to matter. Whether directly experienced or mediated through literature, art, and craft, the development of sustainability as a frame of mind is essentially a matter of apprehending that it is that which lies always beyond our authorship, analyses and management, and yet is closest to us, that liberates us from stultification and spiritually that sustains us.

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Endnotes

1. Entitled "Education for sustainability as a frame of mind," this paper was presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, held at the University of Edinburgh, 20 – 23 September, 2000. It is now published in *Environmental Education Research*. Vol.8, No. 1, pp. 9 – 20.

2. See, for example Rist, G. 1997. The History of Development. London: Zed Books. Also, Bonnett, M. 1999. "Education for sustainable development: a coherent philosophy for environmental education?" *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 313 – 324.

3. Bonnett, M. 2000. "Environmental concern and the metaphysics of education." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. Vol. 31, No. 4. pp. 591 – 602.

4. This contrasts with the view of Bill McKibben who is preoccupied perhaps with "nature" as "wilderness" when he laments the "death" of nature because there is now no place on earth unaffected by human activity. See McKibben, W. 1989. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House.

5. Matthews, F. 1994. *The Ecological Self*. London: Routledge.

6. Smith, R. 1998. "Spirit of middle earth. Practical thinking for an instrumental age." D. Cooper and J. Palmer, eds. *Spirit of the Environment*. London: Routledge.

7. Matthews, F. 1994. *The Ecological Self*. London: Routledge. p. 149.

8. Stables, A, and W. Scott. 2002. "The quest for holism in education for sustainable development." *Environmental Education Research*. Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 53 – 60.

9. Ibid. p. 59

10. See, for example, Katz, E. 1997. "Nature's presence: Reflections on healing and domination." A. Light and J. Smith, eds. *Space, Place, and Environmental Ethics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

11. Initiated in 1986 under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this project explores the ways in which environmental concern should impact on schools. It is now in the third phase of its development. For an account of its central ideas and progress, see Elliott, J. 1999. "Sustainable society and environmental education: future perspectives and demands for the educational system." *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 325 – 340.